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ABSTRACT

As interest in school-based management grows and the number of efforts increases, the gap between the strategy's potential and its realization is being explored. Although school-based management may stimulate a redistribution of informal power or influence, there is little evidence that significant, long-lasting, or widespread changes are occurring either in the exercise of teachers' professional expertise or in parent participation at school-based management sites. Teachers are involved in issues peripheral to fundamental instructional content or methodology and seldom experience change in roles and responsibilities. Parents most commonly function only as advisors or endorsers of decisions already made. Although input into school-site decision making initially enhanced participants' morale and motivation and stimulated school improvement efforts, recent research shows a clear decline in satisfaction and involvement after the initial energizing effects wear off. School-based management has not fulfilled its promise due to problems with delegating and distributing authority. The ability of school-based management to bring about enduring school improvement hinges on how effectively it is linked with shared decision making. Shared decision making can close the gap between the promise and the reality of school-based management by harnessing the energies currently expended to manage, flee, or subvert an unresponsive system. (10 references) (MLH)

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Number 16 December 1989

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INSIGHTS ON EDUCATIONAL POLICY AND PRACTICE

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Shared Decision Making: Harnessing the Energy of People

An increasing number of individual schools and districts are implementing school-based management as a means of enabling school personnel and overall school operations to function more efficiently and flexibly in meeting the school's ultimate goal—student success in learning. The realities of implementation suggest that two critical issues must be resolved in order for the strategy to meet its potential: the delegation of authority to the school site and the distribution of that authority among site participants.

The Promise and Reality of School-Based Management

School-based management has become an increasingly important strategy for guiding school improvement. It is a form of decentralization in which decision-making authority is redistributed for the purpose of stimulating and sustaining improvements in the individual school, resulting in an increase in authority of participants at the school site (Malen, Ogawa, & Kranz, 1989).

The rationale for shifting decision-making authority to the school site is based on two assumptions. The first assumption is that members of the school have the expertise and initiative to improve the instructional program and the school climate (Guthrie & Reed, 1986). The argument is that the inclusion of teachers in school leadership, decision making, and problem solving directly engages their expertise and provides them an incentive to use their initiative. The second assumption is that deep, long-lasting school reform requires the active involvement of *all* stakeholders in the educational process (Guthrie, 1986). This argument suggests that school-based management directly increases the involvement of parents and the community in improving the school.

As interest in school-based management grows and the number of efforts increase, the gap between the strategy's potential and its realization is being explored. Although school-based management may stimulate a redistribution of informal power or influence, there is little evidence that significant, long-lasting, or widespread changes are taking place either in the exercise of teachers' professional expertise and initiative or in the participation of parents at school-based management sites.

Teachers at most current school-based management sites are involved in decisions on issues peripheral to fundamental instructional content or methodology (Malen et al., 1989) and seldom experience major changes in roles and responsibilities (Clune & White, 1988). Parents and community participants on school-based management teams most commonly function only as advisors or endorsers of decisions already made, due either to control of the team by the principal or to district limitations on decision-making domains delegated to the site (Malen et al., 1989). Input into decisions at the school site has been found to *initially* enhance participants' morale and motivation and stimulate efforts toward school improvement, but Malen et al. (1989) reported a *clear decline in satisfaction and involvement* by teachers and parents after the "initial, energizing effects" have worn off.

Why School-Based Management Has Not Fulfilled Its Promise

A closer look at school-based management research points toward a critical implementation factor that requires attention from both researchers and practitioners—the delegation and distribution of formal decision-making

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authority. The *delegation of authority* varies widely among sites implementing school-based management. Authority may be delegated in areas of budget, personnel, and/or curriculum. Many school-based management efforts do not delegate full authority to the site, but rather delegate partial authority over one or more of the areas.

The degree of discretion sites have within an environment of state statutes, district regulations, and contractual agreements also varies widely. Plans range from allowing no discretion (i.e., compliance with existing rules is expected), to providing a temporary lifting of some district or contractual regulations, to instituting a formal waiver system.

Also, a variety of patterns exist in the *distribution of authority* within sites. In commenting on changes in authority distribution, Clune and White (1988) noted that the authority and responsibility of principals—not teachers or parents—appear to be expanded most readily in typical school-based management efforts.

The consequences of limiting the delegation and distribution of authority are predictable. As Wood pointed out, "outcomes such as increased decision quality, satisfaction, commitment, and productivity do not *necessarily* result from allowing organizational participants to become members of decision-making groups" (1984, p. 62). Participation is valued, feelings of satisfaction are enhanced, creativity is encouraged, and participants' acceptance and commitment to the decision is strengthened *only* when groups or individuals believe that there is potential for real influence in their participation, not merely token or passive involvement (Guthrie & Reed, 1986).

Teacher and parent *input* into decision making and the *authority* to make the decisions are simply not the same. The limited delegation and/or distribution of authority in districts that implement school-based management ultimately inhibits the ability of the strategy to sustain initial increases in teacher and parent/community contributions. Instead, participant frustration and a reversion to traditional practices are common (Malen et al., 1989).

As Wood (1984) suggested: "When work group members state that participatory decision making does not work because their input seems to be ignored, they may in fact *be appraising a non-event*. It may be that participatory decision making does not work in these instances because it was never actually attempted" (p. 60). Districts that intend to *actually attempt* school-based management must first ask two questions regarding authority: "what authority is delegated to the school site?" and "how is authority distributed among site participants?" The answers to these questions will determine whether the site implements the strategy in a way that fulfills the promises of school-based management.

What Authority is Delegated to the School Site?

In answering the first authority question—"what authority is delegated to the school site?"—a district seeking full implementation of school-based management will decentralize authority to the greatest possible extent and provide broad discretion to the site. The individual school becomes the fundamental decision-making unit within the educational system and, subsequently, authority is redefined throughout the system. The state and district set broad goals and standards and provide resources, but the employment of resources and the path toward achievement are determined by school-site participants.

Having full authority over personnel and resources enables the site to "integrate goal-setting, policy-making, planning, budgeting, implementing and evaluating in a manner that contrasts with the often unsystematic, fragmented processes which have caused so much frustration and ineffectiveness in the past" (Caldwell & Spinks, 1988, pp. 3-4). Other benefits ascribed to school-based management are a strengthening of the quality of planning, a more efficient use of resources, and increased flexibility in responding to the needs of students and community. Broad authority permits a quicker reallocation of both human and material resources in response to changing needs at the site.

How is Authority Distributed Among Site Participants?

A district's delegation of full authority to the school site cannot, in and of itself, release teachers' expertise or increase parent and community participation. In answering the second authority question—"how is authority distributed among site participants?"—a district must focus on its goal in implementing school-based management. If the intent is to maximize the potential of the school community to change learning outcomes for its students, then the authority delegated to the school site cannot reside with the principal alone. The greatest possible distribution of authority at the school site is required. Site authority must be shared.

The two arguments in support of school-based management—increasing the use of teachers' professional expertise and increasing parent and community participation—are clearly affected by issues of authority. When the implementation of school-based management limits teacher authority to decisions in areas over which they already have influence or in areas peripheral to teaching and learning, the results are a minimal increase in use of expertise and a decline in morale and motivation. When the implementation of school-based management denies authority to parents and community members by giving them advisory or endorser status, or limiting site authority over decision-making domains, the results are maintenance of traditional roles and declining participation.

Shared Decision Making: The Critical School-Based Management Component

The ability of school-based management to bring about enduring school improvement hinges on how effectively it is linked with shared decision making. Most commonly, this term is referred to as "participatory decision making" in the literature. Such decision making is a collaborative approach in which the "superordinate" and "subordinates" work together as equals to "share and analyze problems together, generate and evaluate alternatives, and attempt to reach agreement (consensus) on decisions. Joint decision making occurs as influence over the final choice is shared equally, with no distinction between superordinate and subordinates" (Wood, 1984, p. 61).

Many benefits of shared decision making are reported or implied in the literature. An extensive review by Wood (1984) revealed that shared decision making results in high decision quality; improves employee satisfaction or morale, commitment, and productivity; and reduces resistance to change and absenteeism. An equally positive impact was found on student learning by Darling-Hammond (1988), who asserted that research has confirmed the value of faculty decision making and that "participatory management by teachers and principals, based on collaborative planning, collegial problem solving, and constant intellectual sharing, produces both student learning gains and increased teacher satisfaction and retention" (p. 41). The research on effective schools indicates that administrators of effective schools do not exercise instructional leadership alone. Such leadership is often the collective task of the principal along with other members of the organization (Duttweiler & Hord, 1987).

Finally, there is a belief among many researchers and practitioners that shared decision making is simply the "right way in which to do the right things." The United States must develop a participatory culture to maximize the use of technology and information in order to survive as a world-class culture into the 21st century. "If that is to occur, schools will have to transform themselves into participatory organizational cultures" (Parish, Eubanks, Aquila, & Walker, 1989, p. 393). Sashkin termed it an *ethical imperative* (cited in Lewis, 1989, p. i).

Shared decision making provides models for the roles and relationships essential in a participatory culture. It promises to close the gap between the promise and reality of school-based management by harnessing the energy currently expended by students (to underachieve, tune out, rebel, or drop out), teachers (to circumvent the system), parents and community members (to flee the system), and principals (to try to keep the lid on).

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